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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover and describe: preservice teachers' conceptions of the role of teacher leader; their understandings of the differences between the roles of teacher leaders and principals; and their projections of themselves as teacher leaders during their first year of teaching. During one-on-one semi-structured interviews, the majority of the 15 preservice teachers in this study described teacher leaders as being both advocates for students and agents for positive change. Approximately half of the participants shared traditional views of the role of principal (i.e., hierarchical rule-maker and enforcer). The other half believed that it was important for the principal and the teacher to share leadership responsibilities. Although the participants articulated the difficulty in fulfilling the role of teacher leader early in their careers, they believed they would eventually serve as change agents for school reform. (Contains 32 references.) (Author/SM)

**DESCRIBING PRESERVICE TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF
THE ROLE OF TEACHER LEADER**

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover and describe: (a) preservice teachers' conception of the role of teacher leader, (b) their understandings of the differences between the roles of teacher leader and principal, and (c) their projections of themselves as teacher leaders during their first year of teaching. During one-on-one semi-structured interviews, the majority of the 15 preservice teachers in this study described teacher leaders as being both advocates for students and agents for positive change. Approximately half of the participants shared traditional views of the role of principal (i.e., hierarchical rule-maker and enforcer); the other half believed it was important for the principal and the teacher to share leadership responsibilities. Although the participants articulated the difficulty in fulfilling the role of teacher leader early in their careers, they believed they would eventually serve as change agents for school reform.

Introduction

Teacher empowerment remains a major key to educational reform in the US and yet, as we enter the new millennium, among the many practical difficulties faced by teachers are a lack of substantial power in their profession (Hallinger & Richardson, 1988) and an overwhelming feeling of being controlled and dominated (Apple, 1982). For teacher empowerment to be realized on a national scale, teacher education programs must encourage and develop teacher leadership in their preservice teachers. We believe the earlier this notion is cultivated within the population of educators, the more likely it is that we can achieve a meaningful shift in the power-base of formal schooling. However, there are many questions still to be answered before specific recommendations can be made with regard to how best to achieve this fundamental shift in the role of all professional educators. The overall purpose of this qualitative study was threefold: to uncover and describe: (a) preservice teachers' conception of the role of teacher leader, (b) their understandings of the differences between the roles of teacher leader and principal, and (c) their projections of themselves as teacher leaders during their upcoming first year of teaching.

Educational Reform: The Holmes Group

In the midst of the fervent debate on school reform during the 1980's, the Holmes Group (1986, 1990, 1995), consisting of a number of education deans, began its mission of critically analyzing and proposing reform in teacher education. The Holmes Group's goals, initially established in their report Tomorrow's Teachers, have been to: (a) make the education of teachers intellectually more rigorous; (b) recognize differences in

teachers' knowledge, skill, and commitment in their education, certification, and work; (c) create standards of entry to the profession, including examinations and educational requirements, that are professionally relevant and intellectually defensible; (d) connect universities to schools; and (e) make schools better places for teachers to work, and to learn. Despite the enthusiasm that welcomed the Holmes Group's proposals (Kepler-Zumwalt, 1987), its efforts have been characterized by some as "simplistic" (Tom, 1986), "exclusive" (Olson, 1987), "risky" (Mehlinger, 1986), "predictable" (Nussel, 1986), as well as unsupported by research (Ryan, 1987). However, the Holmes Group has made such an impact on the reform of teacher education in the US that its proposals and influence cannot be ignored.

The Holmes Group is clear that it does not present a specific "blueprint," and acknowledges that universities may interpret the group's proposal differently. One example of a university that has molded the Holmes Group's suggestions to fit its needs is the Neag School of Education's Teacher Education Program at the University of Connecticut (UConn). UConn's program is a five-year integrated bachelor's/master's model which fulfills the Holmes Group's recommendations for a liberal arts subject area concentration prior to embarking on course work in education as well as professional certification (Case, Norlander, & Reagan, 1993). Additionally, this program has been influenced by the Holmes Group's proposal for the development and promotion of teacher leadership.

An Overview of Teacher Leadership

Although the body of research on teacher leadership is growing, it remains

modest (Wasley, 1991). A review of the educational reform literature places emphasis on the importance of teacher leadership in serving our nation's schools. Andrew (1974) provides a model definition of the concept by stating, "Teacher leadership is not meant to refer to administrative or bureaucratic leadership; rather to a central role for teachers in promoting change which improves the quality of education" (p. 8). He offers three areas in which teachers might exert leadership and, hence, prove catalysts for change: (a) self-improvement, (b) improvement of colleagues, and (c) initiation of curriculum change. Andrew proposes that the teacher leader serve as a bridge between the school and university, as well as theory and practice. "The teacher leader is...a master teacher and curriculum leader, devoting talents to stimulating planning and implementation of curricular change" (Andrew, 1974, p. 66).

In their study "Teacher Leadership: Tensions and Ambiguities in Organizational Perspective," Smylie and Denny (1990) discuss a metropolitan K-8 school district that had implemented thirteen new teacher leadership positions. In interviews with the teacher leaders, the authors focus on three general research questions: (a) How did the teacher leaders define and perform their new leadership roles? (b) What factors did the teachers believe influenced the development and performance of their roles? and (c) How did other teachers perceive and respond to these leadership roles and their performance?

Smylie and Denny (1990) uncovered remarkable consistencies regarding how the teacher leaders defined their roles. The teacher leaders viewed themselves primarily as advocates for fellow teachers within their buildings. They expressed considerable agreement that words and phrases such as "facilitator," "helper," "catalyst for improvement," "emotional support," and "source of knowledge" are accurate descriptors

of their roles. The researchers also identified approximately "three dozen" leadership activities in which teacher leaders had engaged. Some of these activities were attending program-related meetings, engaging in building-level decision making, developing district-level curricular programs, developing curricular/instructional material, planning building-level staff development activities, and promoting implementation of district-level programs. According to Smylie and Denny, uncertainties were found regarding "...whether their fellow teachers understood their leadership roles and what those teachers and their principals expected of them in those roles" (p. 246). Because the teacher leaders were expected to continue their classroom teaching, they reported that the greatest concern involved in their roles remained the allocation of time between classroom and leadership responsibilities.

From their surveys of colleagues of the teacher leaders, Smylie and Denny (1990) found that most responded positively to the teacher leaders. The researchers report that although relatively few respondents identified one-on-one interactions with the teacher leaders, teachers did work with them in professional workshops, curriculum committees, and in the development of curricular and instructional material. Regarding the value of the teacher leaders the faculty "... identified more benefits for their buildings, for the district, and for teachers generally than for themselves as individuals" (p. 249). However, a number of classroom teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of personalized assistance from the teacher leaders. The researchers conclude that the definition and performance of teacher leadership roles "may be influenced substantially by the organizational contexts in which they are established" (p. 256).

One of the only in-depth descriptive studies of teacher leaders in action remains

Wasley's (1991) Teachers Who Lead: The Rhetoric of Reform and The Realities of Practice. Choosing to do case studies on three teachers from different National Education Association states in the US, Wasley spent two weeks observing and interviewing each teacher. Her guiding research question was, "What is the nature of teacher leadership as it currently exists in schools today?" Wasley also conducted interviews with three to four colleagues of each teacher leader to uncover their conceptions of the role teacher leader. In addition to conducting interviews, Wasley observed each teacher leader in the classroom and attended evening meetings. She also visited several classrooms of teachers who were to be the recipients of the teacher leaders' assistance.

Similar to Smylie and Denny (1990), Wasley (1991) found that one of the major issues was in defining teacher leadership. She reports that upon asking teachers and administrators to define the term, she received a great deal of confusion and, at best, vague answers. She writes, "Everyone in the educational community had a different interpretation of the teacher leader's role, the purpose, and how the time allocated should be spent" (p. 138). Wasley notes that the teacher leaders themselves found it difficult to define their roles "...because it has never been possible and/or meaningful to spend time talking about it" (p. 147). Because of the traditional lack of differentiated roles among teachers, many felt uncomfortable with the idea that the concept of teacher leadership challenged the egalitarian norms that have so long been established.

Another major finding was that all three teacher leaders expressed concern that communication between them and other teachers regarding the nature of their work was "limited and haphazard." Wasley (1991) also found that, as a result of their positions, the teacher leaders felt more isolated and lonely than when they served solely as classroom

teachers. She notes the existence of ambiguities regarding whether teacher leaders should also serve as classroom teachers. Although the teacher leaders believed their leadership responsibilities augmented their classroom work, their students sometimes resented the fact that they were often out of the classroom.

Despite the many problems and paradoxes involved in teacher leadership, there remains encouraging possibilities. Wasley (1991) notes, "I am both heartened by the potential for teacher leadership, and respectful of the complexity involved in any attempt to create stronger leadership roles for teachers" (p. 168). There is enough evidence to suggest that through the concept of teacher leadership, the many problems that plague the teaching profession can be addressed and, perhaps, eradicated. It is with these possibilities in mind that this current study was undertaken.

Context of the Study

This study examined the conceptions of preservice teachers enrolled in the five-year integrated bachelor's/master's teacher education program in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. With regard to the two groups of preservice teachers that enter its program, the UConn (1998) program handbook states,

The first group enters the program as juniors, spending an additional three years completing a Bachelor's and a Master's degree. The second group enters the program after completing a Bachelor's degree usually majoring in one of the disciplines taught in the public schools Both groups of students leave the program with a Master of Arts in Education and recommendation for certification to teach in the State of Connecticut. (p. 1)

This program also entails striving for strong relationships with public schools, called Professional Development Schools (PDSs), and fostering the concepts of inquiry and reflection (Norlander, Reagan, & Case, 1994). In the fifth (master's) year, following the student teaching experience, UConn students become interns and remain at the PDSs for 20 hours per week to develop and complete action research projects. Norlander et al. (1994) write, "...the research projects are intended to contribute not only to the individual student's education, but also to the renewal and improvement of the setting which the intern is working" (p. 9). It is also in the fifth year when students are required to enroll in an educational leadership course in which the concept of the teacher leader is introduced as a catalyst for positive change in schools.

This course, "Teacher Leadership and Organizations," is a three-credit, graduate level course that is taken in either semester of a student's fifth and final year in the program. Although the course does not introduce organizational theory, it primarily focuses on the dynamics of the culture and climate of schools. Discussions revolve around the idea of teachers serving as influential leaders in the creation of effective learning environments within schools. As the syllabus from one of the three sections of this course states, "As the work of the teacher and school becomes more complex, it is increasingly important that teachers understand their role in establishing norms related to school culture and professional relationships and their role as change agent." Leadership roles that are portrayed in such films as Lean on Me and The Bridge on the River Kwai are also discussed within the context of educational leadership. Outside speakers from teacher unions and other educational settings are invited to discuss policy issues and professional ethics.

Statement of the Problem

A review of the literature places emphasis on the importance of teacher leadership in serving our nation's schools. This call for teacher leadership "is fueled by important and conclusive research conducted over the last 20 years that demonstrates that teachers, too long silent and isolated in classrooms, must take more leadership in the restructuring of public education" (Wasley, 1991, p. 5). To date, case study descriptions of teacher education programs and individual teachers are only beginning to explore this vital issue in education.

While UConn and other universities in the Holmes Group advocate for the promotion of teacher leadership (see also Oja, Diller, Corcoran, & Andrew, 1991), the extent to which preservice teacher education encourages and develops teacher leadership in their preservice teachers remains unclear. Furthermore, with this advocacy of teacher leadership has emerged a lack of clarity in how preservice teachers conceptualize and define the role of teacher leader. If these preservice teachers are expected to serve as the school leaders of tomorrow, these issues must be addressed.

Methodology

The overall purpose of this qualitative study was threefold: to uncover and describe (a) preservice teachers' conception of the role of teacher leader, (b) their understandings of the differences between the roles of teacher leader and principal, and (c) their projections of themselves as teacher leaders during their upcoming first year of teaching. Fifteen preservice teachers enrolled in the master's year, the final year of a five-year integrated bachelor's/master's teacher education program of the Neag School of

Education at the University of Connecticut were selected for the study. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to select individuals who represented all aspects of the UConn program, including elementary, secondary, and special education. A gender balance was also sought. Participants consisted of 7 females and 8 males. Nine were studying elementary education, 5 were studying secondary education, and 1 was studying special education. All the participants had taken or, at the time of the interviews, were enrolled in a required educational leadership course. Thus, they all had been exposed to the concept of "teacher leadership" within the context of the UConn teacher preparation program.

The following interview questions were specifically designed to elicit conceptions regarding teacher leadership:

1. When you hear the term "teacher leader" what do you think of?
2. What has contributed to your definition of "teacher leader"?
3. How does the role of teacher leader differ from that of a principal?
4. How do you see yourself serving as a teacher leader during your upcoming first year of teaching?

Data Collection and Analysis

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim following each meeting. Content analysis of transcripts was a two step process of coding and interpretation. First, all passages were coded using codes which corresponded to the various research questions for this study. Once specified, these passages were interpreted to develop a snapshot of the participants' conceptions at the

time of the study. The reliability of this coding and interpretation was checked by comparing codes and subsequent interpretation by two different coders (Bishop & Anderson, 1990). Any discrepancies in the coding or interpretation was discussed until an agreement was reached. In the extremely few instances in which complete agreement was not reached, the passages in the transcripts were discarded. Patterns among preservice teachers' conceptions were identified and reported in the following section.

Results

Patterns emerging from this study transcended both gender and academic discipline. For this reason, gender and field of study are not discussed in the findings and discussion. Findings indicate that the participants shared similar views regarding their conceptions of the role of teacher leader. Almost all the participants spoke of teacher leaders as being advocates for students and agents for positive change. While half of the participants shared traditional views of the role of principal (i.e., hierarchical rule maker and enforcer), the other half believed it was important for the principal and the teacher to share leadership responsibilities. This latter view appears to be aligned with the views of advocates for teacher leadership (Homes Group, 1990; Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1996; Wasley, 1991). Considering how the participants viewed themselves as teacher leaders during their upcoming first year of teaching, the overwhelming majority articulated the difficulty in fulfilling that role. The participants spoke of becoming acclimated to their new schools before attempting to take on leadership positions. The majority of the participants, however, believed they would eventually become agents for positive change throughout their teaching careers.

Conceptions of Teacher Leader

With regard to their conception of teacher leader, almost all of the participants' descriptions primarily centered on being advocates for their students. "My first concern always goes to the students," asserted one participant. This view is aligned with much of the current literature. Sergiovanni (1996), for example, writes, "School decisions should be based on what we believe is good, and on what we know is effective for enhancing student academic, social, and moral development" (p. 119). The need for collaboration and the exchanging of ideas among teachers also emerged as characteristic of teacher leadership. A common sentiment shared by the majority of the participants was articulated by one participant: "When you're working in a school, the only way you're going to have any reform is by having a full community effort." Another participant commented, "If you're an effective teacher leader, you understand the roles of giving and taking and asserting yourself and knowing when to take a step back." As one participant suggested, strong teacher leaders are not "dictators," but are able to "share power" (Lambert et al, 1996, p. 101) with their colleagues. Yet another participant expressed, "I think true leadership is when you help achieve a goal that benefits all."

In this study, many participants discussed the need for teachers to "step up" to challenges that serve the school as a whole. "I think of (a teacher leader) as someone who promotes change, someone who is willing to go above and beyond for other teachers, for students, and for the good of the school," stated one participant. The majority of the participants' conceptions of teacher leadership was similar to Lieberman's (1988) view when she suggests that "if there is to be a community of leaders in school, teachers must have opportunities to take on more responsibilities, more decision-making power, and

more accountability for the results" (p. 649). The majority of the participants of this study appear to support the idea that teacher leaders bring about positive change for themselves, their colleagues, and their students (Andrew, 1974; Wasley, 1991).

Teacher Leader vs. Principal

Traditionally, the individual serving in a formal school administrative position, such as principal, has been viewed as the primary authority and decision-maker (Dunlap & Goldman, 1991). Although one participant in this study noted that "from a hierarchical standpoint" this view tends to be a "stereotype," half of the participants believed that principals usually serve in "political" or "bureaucratic" positions that enable them to "set rules" and "designate responsibilities." As one participant suggested, "(Principals) are like managers of a business." Considering differences between principals and teachers, another participant said, "The principal can make decisions regarding the fate of teachers that a teacher cannot." Views such as these, shared by half of the participants, have been noted in the literature, but they tend to be at odds with advocates of teacher leadership. The Holmes Group (1990) reminds us, "Talking about teachers and administrators as separate parties is self-destructive" (p. 83). One participant commented, "I think the best administrators are teacher leaders." Thus, there is evidence that the traditional, ingrained difference between teachers and administrators may now be shifting. Expressing her satisfaction with a principal with whom she worked, one participant noted, "He actually makes it a point to be a part of the students' lives...he is a teacher leader himself."

"I don't think there should be such clear differences (between teacher leader and principal)," suggested a participant. Patterns that emerged regarding the other half of the

participants' thoughts on the differences between the role of a teacher leader and that of a principal reinforce this idea. In this study, half of the participants articulated the idea that teachers do not necessarily have to serve in a preconceived "leadership role" to prove to be a teacher leader. As a participant said, "...in terms of the improvement of the school, I think that teachers are just as important as the principal." Wasley (1992) points out that teacher leaders do not function in a vacuum, and that they must work in accord with other school-based partners, including principals. "Teachers cannot assume important leadership roles without the support of these partners, nor can they make necessary changes if they do not have the support of these partners over time" (Wasley, 1992, p. 235). The two general differences in beliefs with regards to the roles of principal and teacher leader found in this study, highlight the need for further understanding of and inquiry into the benefits of collaborative decision-making in schools.

Projections of Themselves as Teacher Leaders

In this case study, important patterns emerged regarding the participants' projections of themselves as teacher leaders during their impending first year of teaching. A common sentiment, expressed by one participant, was, "I see myself just trying to survive during my first year!" In fact, almost all the participants discussed the importance of finding their niche in the "culture" of their new schools and becoming proficient classroom teachers before attempting any type of true teacher leadership. As one participant expressed, "I'm just going to try to keep my head above water for the first few years."

Some participants discussed the idea of being a member of a committee or taking

on an after-school activity, but none believed they could prove effective change agents during their first year of teaching. The majority of the participants thought of themselves as eventually "growing into" the role of teacher leader. "I need to learn something first before I start making suggestions; make sure that I know how everything operates first," said one preservice teacher. Indeed, as Baker and Andrew (1993) have found, first-year teachers tend not to take part in leadership positions. It is not until a teacher's third year of teaching that leadership qualities begin to emerge (M. D. Andrew, personal communication, April 9, 1999). However, when that has occurred, the majority of participants expressed the desire to become effective change agents in their schools in which they could collaborate with their colleagues and members of their communities to better serve their young charges.

Conclusions

Findings in this study addressed the fact that this sample population of preservice teachers in the University of Connecticut's Integrated Bachelor's/Master's program share common beliefs and conceptions of teacher leadership and what it means to serve as such. Even though the majority of the participants felt it would be extremely difficult to serve as teacher leaders during their first year of teaching, all had expressed confidence in eventually functioning in that role. All the participants had already been aware of the concept of teacher leadership via a required educational leadership course, but it would be difficult to credit this class as impetus for their conceptions of the role of teacher leader. When asked what had contributed to their views, only 3 participants mentioned the course, and among the ones that did, 2 expressed satisfaction with it. Research

findings suggest that the preservice teachers' conception of teacher leader probably has not emerged from a singular source, but instead from their entire experience as student and student teacher.

One of the major concerns brought to the surface in this study was the existence of a limited number of models of teacher leadership in schools. One participant expressed concern that if he attempted to exert leadership qualities within his first five years of teaching, he may "step on (other teachers') toes" and that he would have to "play the political game" to implement his ideas. About half of the participants mentioned their clinic placements as places in which they saw teacher leaders in action. One participant, however, noticed, "Teachers are shutting their doors and not wanting to be with anyone else, not willing to take on any extra responsibilities beyond their own lives." As Wasley (1991) indicates, "Among the difficulties that need resolving are determining whether the intentions for the positions (of teacher leaders) match the realities..." (p. 156). As revealed by some preservice teachers who are training in public schools, this is not always the case.

Implications

If results from studies such as this are considered by teacher educators, the potential for that population to influence reform agendas in public schools, via their preservice teachers, can be far reaching. As mentioned above, the University of Connecticut is a member of the Holmes Group and as such has adopted their recommendations for teacher education reform, including extending its teacher preparation to a five-year program and, as a result, promoting teachers as agents for

positive change. UConn focuses on the concept of teacher leadership in the fifth-year of its program via specific course work, internships in the field, and original inquiry projects into current and relevant pedagogical concerns. The all-important fifth-year truly gives preservice teachers the time and experience to begin forming conceptions and developing techniques of teacher leadership. It is clear, through this study, that UConn students are considering the notion of what it means to serve as teacher leaders. It is our hope that this research study assists in the dialogues of those teacher educators who are considering implementing a five-year teacher education model.

Speaking of the benefits of the five-year program at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), Michael Andrew (1989), director of teacher education at that institution, writes, "We have heeded those researchers and commentators who have concluded that the best way to teach methods is in the context of real experience. Theory removed from personal practice is just that: theory unconnected to practice" (p. 49). UConn's and UNH's programs are good examples of how two universities have been influenced by reformers such as the Holmes Group. Both advocate for strong collegiality and the sharing of ideas between the university and the public school, as well as foster the ideas of inquiry, reflection, and leadership.

Further arguments supporting five-year teacher education programs have been voiced (Dunbar, 1981; Van Zandt, 1998). Dunbar (1981), whose university moved to a five-year program in 1964, notes a positive derivative of this model when he states, "The employers of the fifth-year teachers consistently rate their professional performance as high" (p. 14). After a ten-year study of the differences between graduates of four-year and five-year programs, Andrew (1990) writes,

Five-year graduates enter the profession at higher rates and stay in teaching longer. They are happier with their careers and would be more likely to choose teaching again Differences are striking with regard to knowledge of a variety of teaching models, teaching strategies, classroom management, designing curriculum for individual differences, and help in developing a philosophy of education. (p. 50)

In their eleven institution study of four-year and five-year programs, Baker and Andrew (1993) conclude that "...the clearest differences (were) in the area that may be characterized as commitment to the profession, entry, retention, curriculum development, and the desire to collaborate with colleagues" (p. 16). There exists significant evidence to support the Holmes Group's proposal of extending preservice teacher education beyond the baccalaureate level. Graduates of five-year programs are more prepared for the subtleties and challenges of the teaching profession. Hence, we hope it is clear to those teacher educators considering implementing five-year programs how teacher leadership can be fostered via such a program.

By examining how teacher leadership is conceived by preservice teachers' from such a program, much can be learned about the attitudes with which these so-called "decision makers, leaders, and innovators for the twenty-first century" (University of Connecticut, 1998, p. 1) enter the profession. Do they slowly begin to forsake their beliefs of teachers as agents for change in their struggle to "keep their heads above water"? What might cause some otherwise talented and energetic preservice teachers to abandon the "missionary ideals formed during teacher training" (Veenman, 1984, p. 143). If true and lasting change is to take place in public schools, the chasm that exists between

theory and practice, and between preservice and inservice teaching, must be bridged.

Teacher leadership can be an important starting point in this goal.

As Michael Fullan (1993) reminds us, "Teacher educators like other would-be change agents must take some initiative themselves, which is now happening on several fronts" (p. 113). The first major step has been taken by five-year teacher education programs which promote teacher leadership in their preservice teachers. The next step that must be taken is to follow its graduates into practice to not only assure that teacher leadership is in fact occurring in schools, but also to offer support beyond preservice education. The struggles of the beginning teacher may be minimized by five-year programs, but they certainly are not eliminated. Teacher leadership can be nurtured in practice via sustained support of neophyte practitioners beyond the fifth year of preparation. This is directly aligned with the Holmes Group's (1986, 1990, 1995) call for strong collegial fellowship between the school and the university. Five-year teacher education programs offer a beginning to this practice, but they must now move beyond the academy to offer sustained professional development across the professional life-span of its graduates. Our future studies will focus on inservice teachers' conceptions of teacher leader and how they believe they fulfill this role, if in fact they feel they do. We hope then to bridge the gap between preservice and inservice teachers' conceptions of the role of teacher leader, and add to the growing body of knowledge of what teacher leadership actually looks like in practice.

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